

## [When you first look at Mr. McKie]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in

New England

TITLE Shoe Laster in Lynn - #1

WRITER Jane K. Leary

DATE 3/17/39 WDS. PP. 6

CHECKER DATE

SOURCE GIVEN (?) Interview - [P. Bailly?] Samuel Mckie

COMMENTS

Name— Jane K. Leary

Informant—Samuel [Mckie?], 45 Parrott St.

Assignment—The Shoe Laster

Section I

Page 1

When you first look at Mr. McKie, you think he appears too young (he doesn't look much over fifty) to have been a laster of the hand lasting days. But a slight protruding of the left

## Library of Congress

side of his lower lip substantiates his avowal that he has been a laster for more than 50 years, a member of the laster's union for 53 years.

This protruding of his lower lip? Its the characteristic mark of the old hand laster. For in the natural pocket of the mouth there, the old hand laster of shoes hold his tacks. He trainee himself to feed them from his mouth one by one and head foremost. The left hand took the tacks and right hand pounded them into the shoe. Sometimes a veterant laster could even chew tobacco with one side of his mouth while he fed himself tacks from the other.

"In the old days a laster did all four operations of the laster lasting . He did the assemblin', the pullin' over, the drawin' and shapin', and the tackin'. The assemblin' consisted of puttin' in the counter ( the stiff inner section of the back part of the shoe which holds it firm) and the box toe. The pullin' over consisted of drawing the leather over the last; the drawin' and shapin' wuz the pullin' the leather tight over the last with the pincers. Ya had ta know leather ta do this right. For some sections of leather'll stretch more'n others. If the leather wuzn't pulled over jest right, the shoe wouldn't be shaped right 2 when it wuz done.

"The tackin consisted of tackin' the upper ta the inner sole.

"The first lastin' machine didn't do all four of them operations. It wuz the Boston Lasting Machine. It wuz practically a hand lastin' machine. The laster did the assemblin', the pullin', the drawin' and shapin' by hand. The machine drove the tacks in. This machine afterwards become the property of the United Shoe Machinery Corporation.

"This machine wuz first tried in Lynn in Mark Worthley's factory. The first strike wuz held in that shop over it somewhere in '86 or '87.

"Most of the union members resented its comin'. They thought, in the first place, it wuzn't practical; and they figured if it wuz pratictal it would take their jobs away.

## Library of Congress

"But the lastin' machine wuz here ta stay. Not so many years afterwards come the consolidated hand lastin' machine, commonly called the niggerhead, because a man from Brazil invented it. That's the best all round lastin' machine in the shops still because it can be made to do all the tackin'. In modern shops there are other machines to do part of the tackin' today, like the bed machine that wipes in the heel and the toe of the shoe faster than the niggerhead can do it. But the old niggerhead is the thing that still tacks 3 the sides. If a company can't afford many machines, it always chooses the niggerhead because the whole shoe can be tacked by that. No other machine can tack the whole thing.

"Of course there's been improvements an the niggerhead. And each time there's been an improvement, the United Shoe Machinery Corporation took out a new patent on it. But the niggerhead patents run out now, I guess. A patent only lasts so many years.

"Just the same though, a shoe company is jest about forced ta get their machinery from the United Shoe. That's because they still got patents on so many machines that a shoe factory needs, that they'd refuse ya one of their machines they got a monopoly on if ya didn't get 'em all from them. They got the shoe machinery all sewed up that way and I guess they'll hold the power for some time ta come.

"They rent the machines ta the companies. Sometimes there's a flat rate per month or for a stated time. On other machines they got some sorta apparatus that tells how many shoes wuz worked on that machine and they get so much per shoe.

"In some modern shops today, the four operations of the lasting department are done by four different operators on four different machines. The first operator does 4 the assemblin' and a machine tacks three temporary tacks in the heel; a second machine pulls the leather over the last and puts one tack on each side of the ball of the foot and one at the toe. The third machine puts all of the tacks on the heel of the machine shoe with one click of the machine. The fourth machine is the old niggerhead, which tacks one by one, but quick as

## Library of Congress

a flash, the tacks around the front part of the shoe. Then a steamer softens the leather and fits it snug around the last.

“But in a lot of shops today, thee is only the niggerhead. I work in one like that. There are two operators. The one assembles the shoes and pulls them and draws them, and puts three tacks in the front of the shoe and three in the back. Then the niggerhead wipes 'em in all around. “

“We still feed ourselves tacks from the mouth in that shop. I can hold fifty or sixty in my mouth easy and make 'em come out one by one head first as I want 'em.

“No, we don't often swallow 'em. One in a while I have. But they never did me no harm.”